

# Purpose-Empowered Leadership

Hosted by Dr. Mike Armour

## Episode UYL1914

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Today I want to delve into one of the most fundamental questions which any of us can ask ourselves. To be specific, what's the meaning of my life? What purpose does it have?

Toward the end of his career, Dr. Karl Jung, one of the founders of modern psychiatry, made a telling observation. He noted that two-thirds of the people who sought him out for therapy had no diagnosable neurotic or psychotic condition. They simply lacked a sense of meaning at the core of their being.

What a sad state of affairs for anyone. And it's doubly sad for someone who is a leader. The leader's role, after all, is to inspire people. And leaders do so by giving people a compelling reason, a compelling why to aspire to something greater. If leaders have only a hazy notion of their own sense of purpose, they are ill equipped to instill a sense of purpose in their followers.

Today I'm going to spell out a process for identifying your life purpose. Finding that purpose is a powerful step if you want to Upsize Your Leadership.

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Leadership training and literature routinely stress the importance of a leader's vision. Articulating this vision clearly and rallying people around it is the essence of effective leadership. Properly communicated, vision unifies a band of followers and gives them a compelling "why" for what the leader asks of them.

I contend, however, that for leaders themselves, an even greater "why" is essential. The leader may choose to keep this "why" private, never disclosing it to his or her followers. But the more fully leaders understand this greater "why," the more focused and energized their leadership will be.

This greater "why" could go by a number of names. For the present, let's just call it a personal sense of purpose. It's a compelling awareness of what we are personally called to be, to become. I think of it as the orchestrating why of our existence. It condenses our unique calling in the universe to a simple, short manifesto.

And I do believe that each of us has a unique calling. That is, nature, nurture, and experience equip each of us to make a singular and valuable contribution to the world around us. We experience life at its fullest when we are making that kind of contribution.

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Can we have telling impact as a leader without a distinct understanding of our life purpose? I believe so. I've experienced that myself. Much of my leadership success came at a time when my own sense of an orchestrating purpose was a bit fuzzy, to say the least. I certainly could not have stated it in clear, concise terms.

Once I could fully grasp my purpose, however, once I could spell it out distinctly, both my life and my leadership took on bold new dimensions. For the first time, I understood why certain moments of leadership success were personally fulfilling, while other moments, equally successful to all appearances, left me somewhat empty. Armed with this insight, I could now quickly decide which new opportunities to consider and which ones to reject out of hand.

This ability was liberating. I had long been caught in a dilemma which is common to people who truly enjoy leadership. If they excel as leaders, people take note of it. And with great leadership in short supply, being known as a good leader brings hosts of opportunities their way. People regularly ply them with requests to step into this or that leadership role.

In addition, leaders of this caliber have a natural instinct to recognize situations which beg for leadership. Thus, between needs brought to them by others and needs which they surface themselves, leaders face an overabundance of opportunities to get involved. To be effective, however, they can say "yes" to only a portion – perhaps a rather tiny portion – of the opportunities before them. How, then, do they sort through these opportunities and decide which ones to embrace, which ones to ignore? That's the dilemma to which I alluded moments ago.

For decades, decisions like this were never easy for me. And in the process, I frequently said "yes" too often. Overcommitment became a way of life. I routinely paid for it by living on the edge of exhaustion for months on end. And some of my worst leadership failures resulted from having too many things competing for my time and my attention.

And unfortunately, my story is not an isolated one. Many talented leaders are all too familiar with this struggle. They battle it, as I once did, by working to improve their personal self-management. And these efforts at self-improvement can certainly pay dividends. But the thing which was most transformative for me was uncovering my life purpose.

That discovery now allows me to assess opportunities for involvement in terms of how well they align with my purpose, my calling. When they do not, I can quickly decide to forego them.

Why forego them? Because looking back on my life, I can see that what has given me the most fulfillment, the most deep-seated and enduring satisfaction, are things which aligned closely with my true purpose in life. Endeavors which fell outside of this alignment were not particularly fulfilling, even when I pulled them off successfully.

And I've also learned that what fulfills us also energizes us. It helps us feel fully alive. Given the choice, therefore, I want to devote my time and energy to things which make for fulfillment. By knowing my purpose in life, I can more easily recognize opportunities which have abundant prospects for fulfillment. No longer am I left to stumble upon fulfillment through some series of random, hit-or-miss choices about where to apply my abilities. I can make such choices (if you will pardon the pun) "purposefully."

We uncover our orchestrating purpose for life, therefore, by getting to the root of why certain experiences abound with fulfillment. That's why I developed an exercise to use with coaching

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and mentoring clients who want to unearth their orchestrating why. Let me step you through the exercise.

First, you're only going to isolate your orchestrating why by spending time reflecting on your past. In all likelihood, the purpose at the core of your being isn't going to suddenly leap to the forefront of your attention. You must ferret it out. And you do that by thinking back over your life and identifying moments which were genuinely fulfilling for you.

To pursue this reflection, find a time and place as free as possible from distractions. The goal is to let your mind roam freely and unhurriedly through the past. What moments in your life brought you special fulfillment? What were the moments in which you felt most alive? What were the times in which what you were doing left you so enthralled that time seemed to evaporate altogether?

As you identify these moments, write them down. If possible, build a list of at least five occasions which were like this. Ideally, these occasions should be somewhat separated in time so that they each have a distinct context. If finding five examples proves impossible, work with whatever events you can recall. Some people need more than one period of reflection to compile a complete list.

Next, from your list of occasions, select one for further examination, preferably the one which stands out in your mind as most fulfilling of all. Transport yourself in your imagination back to that moment and put yourself in it. Step into as though you were living the moment for the first time right now. Look around at where you are in this moment, what is happening, what you are experiencing. Move to a moment in that experience when the sense of fulfillment was notably intense. Ask yourself, "What is it about this moment that makes it so fulfilling?" Don't rush your answer. Your unconscious mind has the answer to that question. Give it time to let the answer percolate into conscious awareness.

Write down what comes to mind. If you don't seem to receive a distinct response, write down whatever responses did surface. Now, move on to a second experience, and a third, repeating this process with each one.

Once you have listed the fulfilling aspect of these individual experiences, review your responses as a whole. Do you see any common themes? Do you notice a pattern in the responses? Was the fulfillment from doing certain kinds of things? Working with certain kinds of people? Achieving certain kinds of results? Being in certain kinds of places? The common denominators in your responses all point you to the deepest source of your fulfillment and therefore to your underlying purpose.

But let me add a word of caution. If you are still relatively young – say, in your twenties or thirties – this exercise may not yield the full benefit of its potential. That's because it works most powerfully when we have a vast array of life experiences to draw on, so that we can isolate a variety of moments which were so fulfilling that they stand out distinctly from more routine moments. It simply takes time to accumulate that reservoir of experience.

That's why I encourage people to repeat this exercise every few years. As your reservoir of experiences grows deeper and broader, repeating the exercise may surface a more nuanced understanding of your purpose. That has certainly been true with me.

Here's another exercise which can supplement your effort to ascertain your core purpose. I have borrowed this approach from my friend Juanell Teague, who built a successful career helping professional speakers hone their message and their marketing. Juanell knows that speakers will communicate more powerfully when addressing themes which are closely tied to their orchestrating why. Her formula for uncovering this why is to identify the intersection of your passion and your compassion. What are the circumstances in which these two feelings come together? Near that intersection, she says, you will find the purpose for your life.

This sounds rather simplistic, I will admit. But carefully done, I've found it to be a powerful tool in helping my clients uncover a deeper sense of their calling in life.

And once you uncover this calling, this core purpose, this orchestrating why, what do you do with it? You use it to structure your life around commitments, activities, people, and environments which hold the greatest promise of fulfillment. You choose leadership roles where the likelihood of fulfillment is high. You make career choices based on where you can function in fullest accord with your orchestrating purpose. You lend your volunteer and community energies to settings where there are notable prospects for fulfillment.

Of course, not all aspects of life can be conformed to your life purpose. But the more fully your orchestrating why is integrated with your daily activity, the more you will experience a rich life. And the more depth there will be to your leadership.

My own quest to identify my purpose ultimately led to this expression of it: "to help people succeed by giving them clarity and insight." Once I reduced my purpose to that phrasing, I could immediately see how this had been a unifying pattern in all the career paths which I had enjoyed most. It's why I've thoroughly enjoyed the last 20 years of leadership coaching, mentoring, and training. It is why my years in ministry were so personally meaningful. It's why my work with emerging community leaders in Africa and nations of the former Soviet Union brought deep emotional rewards. I was helping people succeed by giving them clarity and insight.

Perhaps you already grasp your unique calling, your orchestrating why. Let me commend you for making that discovery. If you have only a hazy notion of your life purpose – or perhaps no sense of it at all – set aside time to work through the exercises which I've outlined. Even if they do not bring you to immediate clarity as to your life purpose, the experience will itself be enlightening. And enlightenment is often the first step toward clarity.

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*Dr. Mike Armour is the managing principal of Strategic Leadership Development International, which he founded in Dallas in 2001. Learn more about his leadership development services at [www.LeaderPerfect.com](http://www.LeaderPerfect.com).*

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